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THE SHORT BALLOT MOVEMENT AND SIMPLIFIED POLITICS

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In foreign countries they talk about politics and politicians, but they do not mean what we mean. With us the world of politics is largely made up of an enormous mesh of mechanical detail in which the average citizen quite properly takes but little interest. He attends to his own business and leaves politics to politicians. The politician is not necessarily an office holder, and if he is, it is not this fact which makes him a politician. He may be an office holder, either appointive or elective, and yet not be a politician at all in our unique American meaning of the word. By a politician we mean a man who makes a business of citizenship and the duties thereof. He knows that the name of the state treasurer is Peter Jones, that his term expires next January, that the election for his successor will be held in November, that the primaries come in September, that Peter Jones will not be allowed to have the office again but that it will probably be bestowed upon Peter Smith who has been working hard for the party with this object in view and has won the favor of the politicians in the dominant party.

Of all this Mr. Average Citizen is entirely unaware. He does not even recall that the term of the state treasurer will expire, yet in due time when election day comes in November, Mr. Average Citizen will vote for Peter Smith because the magic word "Republican" stands opposite Mr. Smith's name on the ballot. Ask Mr. Average Citizen as he emerges from the polling booth whom he voted for for state treasurer and he will not have the slightest idea. He voted for the Republican, whoever that was. He expressed no opinion of his own for the simple reason that he had no opinion to express. Mr. Average Citizen is not a politician. Why should he know anything about the state treasurer?

The problem of democratic government is how to make Mr. Average Citizen substantially as familiar with politics as Mr. Politician is. The old remedy is to say that "all good citizens should go

into politics." Or "there should be a civic uprising of the people." Or, "it is Mr. Average Citizen's own fault for failing to take an interest"; but in spite of years of preaching, that remedy has never been adopted, except in occasional and temporary abnormal paroxysms of civic effort when some unusual scandal occurs.

The remedy offered by the short ballot advocates reverses the sequence. The short ballot demand is—make politics so simple that what the average citizen knows will be all there *is* to know, thus leaving nothing of importance to furnish an exclusive field for the activity of the politicians. Today politics is partly in the hands of the people and partly in the hands of the politicians. Abolish the politicians' end of the game and you may get popular government in reality.

Take for example the state government of New York! The people elect and select a governor. They also elect, but do not *select*, a lieutenant-governor, secretary of state, state treasurer, comptroller, attorney-general and state engineer and surveyor in the state administration. When the party leaders pick out a candidate for governor they anxiously consider the question "How will so-and-so take with the people?" When they pick out a man for state treasurer no such question comes up. It is not necessary for a state treasurer to take with the people. If they should nominate an experienced banker for the post, the fact of his superior fitness would not make him liable to win, and it will pay them much better to nominate somebody who is officially connected with labor or the farmers or with some region of the state which is politically important. And the state treasurership becomes in reality an appointive office, appointed by one or the other of the groups of party leaders, who have no legal or official responsibility for the results. Consult the tabulated election returns and you will find that he was elected by almost exactly the same number of votes that elected the comptroller and the state engineer and surveyor and the other minor officers. Often the total variation between the foremost and the hindmost candidate on the tail of a given party's ticket is less than 2 per cent, demonstrating incontestably that the voters did not pick and choose among the candidates for the minor offices, but voted blindly under the guidance of the magic word "Republican" or "Democratic." When the state treasurer is duly elected and goes into office, he does not issue his statement to the people thanking

them for the responsibilities with which they have entrusted him. No paper in the state would print such a statement except as a curiosity. He does, however, manifest his gratitude in less public ways to the coterie of men who are really responsible for his being there, *i.e.*, the party leaders and those other political friends whose persistent wire-pulling and intriguing with the party leaders, brought about his nomination.

That the administration of the treasurer thus chosen will be political goes without saying, unless the party leaders happen to have mistaken their man. Of course there is the civil service to protect some of the rank and file. And there is probably one deputy who has been in the department for many years and has become so indispensable to its operation that none of the transient amateurs who come and go above his head could get along without him. The state treasurer himself does not need to do much, and even if he is capable of learning all the possibilities of his office, he does not need to bother unless he wants to.

A state treasurer of New York committed suicide a few years ago. He was a far from brilliant man, but he was honest and his books were found correct. An investigation of his office was pending and the explanation given for his suicide was that he dreaded the humiliation which would follow upon the disclosure of his ignorance of the technique of his office.

So long as a little office like the state treasurership continues to exist on an obscure elective basis, two things are bound to happen. First, the state treasurer will be appointed by politicians. Second, politicians must continue to exist because there has got to be someone to appoint the state treasurer. Likewise, of course, with other minor offices in the state and city and county.

The short ballot remedy is to transfer the power to appoint the state treasurer from the politicians to the first citizen of the state, *i.e.*, the governor.

Now it is quite possible that the governor would appoint the same man that the politicians did and for the same political reasons. Nevertheless, there is an essential gain. The fight against inefficiency will be transferred from a jungle to an open field. The elective treasurer *must* be in politics; the appointive treasurer only *may* be. The politicians would rather appoint the state treasurer direct amid the hurly-burly of a popular election than be obliged to

importune the governor to appoint their man. For the governor may or may not be amenable to their reasoning. Quite possibly he had conferred a greater favor upon them by accepting their nomination for governor than they did upon him by offering it. He was elected at any rate largely because he found favor with the rank and file of the people. The politicians only helped and their hold on him is correspondingly weaker. Add to this the unpleasant fact that a governor becomes a popular hero every time he hits a politician over the head.

The change to the appointive or short ballot system thus cannot be guaranteed to take the administration out of politics and out of the hands of the politicians, but it can and does make the continuation of politicians and of their style of politics conditional upon the friendliness of a public officer who must accept conspicuous responsibility for his attitude. We can beat the politician on that battle-ground.

Braddock's army was helpless against the Indians in the natural ambush of the forest glades. It defended itself easily when George Washington had led it out into the broad meadow-lands.